

Pop music critic Robert Hilburn must despise the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences. How else can one explain the venomous and self-contradictory attack he launched in his Calendar commentary on this year's Grammy nominations? ("Clapton Plugs Into Grammy Glory," Jan. 8.)

Hilburn faults the recording academy for recognizing rock guitar legend Eric Clapton with nine Grammy nominations this year, after ignoring his outstanding achievements in the 1960s and '70s. While it is true that Clapton "didn't win even one Grammy" for the indisputable brilliance of his early works, Hilburn depreciates Clapton's continuing influence and virtuosity by stating that he doesn't deserve nine nominations for his most recent accomplishments.

That's nonsense! Clapton's blues-based guitar playing and heartfelt songwriting communicate a downright tunefulness virtually unsurpassed by other contemporary guitarists. The music on Clapton's "Unplugged" album demonstrates his talent and surely merits recognition.

But, more important, Hilburn misleads his readers when he writes that Clapton's having been overlooked in the past underscores the academy's "continuing inability to isolate the defining moments in pop history."

How does what the recording academy did or didn't do a quarter of a century ago reflect what it's doing in the present? Hilburn touches his complaint in a non sequitur that completely ignores the history and evolution of the awards.

In the late '60s and early '70s, there were only 2,000 or so voting members in the academy. Most represented jazz, rhythm and blues and pop music. There existed no formal rock categories at the time Clapton was playing in Cream or Derek and the Dominos, both classic rock bands. The only category they could have slipped into was contemporary pop.

And who won those awards? For 1967, the year Cream released its landmark "Disraeli Gears" album, the Beatles won the best contemporary album award for "Sgt. Pepper," arguably the most seminal work to influence the course of pop and rock in modern music history. Simon & Garfunkel were winners in 1971, and George Harrison was awarded in 1973 for "The Concert for Bangladesh" album, on which Eric Clapton performed.

The next year, best album went to Stevie Wonder for

Clapton Plugs Into Grammy

■ Commentary: The influential Eric Clapton surely deserves plenty of recognition, but where were his Grammys in the '60s and '70s?

By ROBERT HILBURN
TIMES POP MUSIC CRITIC

Does Eric Clapton really deserve nine Grammy awards—the number of nominations he received Thursday in the 35th annual awards competition? Absolutely. One of the most influential guitarists in pop-rock history, Clapton merits at least three or four Grammys for his landmark blues-rock excursions in the '60s with Cream, maybe another two or three for his Derek & the Dominos days—notably "Layla"—and a final two or three for some of his classy '70s solo efforts. But not for what he didn't win even one Grammy for in the '60s and '70s.



BOB CARNEY / Los Angeles Times
Eric Clapton: Nine nominations, including best song, "Tears in Heaven."

The Major Categories

ALBUM

- Eric Clapton, "Unplugged"
- K.d. lang, "Ingénue"
- Annie Lennox, "Diva"
- U2, "Rattle and Hum"
- Various artists, "Beauty and the Beast"

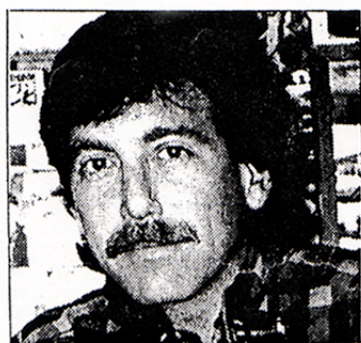
SINGLE

- Eric Clapton, "Tears in Heaven"
- Billy Ray Cyrus, "Achy Breaky Heart"
- Celine Dion and Peabo Bryson, "The Prayer"
- K.d. lang, "Constant C"
- Vanessa Williams, "The Way Love Feels"

SONG

Under the leadership of NARAS president Michael Greene, new categories of hard rock, heavy metal, rap and alternative music have been introduced.

STEPHAN MICHAELS



"Innervisions," another undeniable work of musical genius. Had these honors been awarded to the Monkees or the Partridge Family, I might be able to see Hilburn's point.

It was in 1979 that the term "rock" was first introduced in a Grammy category. The winner was a man who influenced a generation, Hilburn's all time favorite—Bob Dylan!

There's no question that rock and other alternative music forms were excluded from the awards until recently. But under the leadership of NARAS president Michael Greene, new categories of hard rock, heavy metal, rap and alternative music have been introduced. And during the last five years, the academy has actively lobbied artists, their management and record companies to join the academy's voting body, boosting the electorate to 6,800 members. Thus, Hilburn's charge of 35 years of "classic blemishes" and "continuing inability" appears a bit skewed and unfair.

Perhaps Hilburn's most disturbing idea regards Clapton's nomination for best single. The song "Tears in Heaven" is a moving, soulful expression of loss over the tragic death of Clapton's

4-year-old son, Conor. Yet Hilburn discounts the song's sentiment because "it told us far less about the emotional and sociological currents of 1992 than numerous other records." How pretentious!

Since when do musicians have to be sociologists? Music is about feeling an emotion and at its best touches each individual listener in a very personal way. If a song accomplishes that, it's because it came from the heart, not because it's politically correct.

It has always saddened me that Hilburn writes about music the way a high school teacher might critique an essay. He insists that a song must have some kind of social relevance . . . "an expression of the complexities of love in an age compounded by AIDS," or "a reflection of race relations that tries to reconcile life's blessings with its injustices."

Indeed, he never seems to talk about the music itself and the finer points of performance. And, after all, musical achievement is what the recording academy is presumably rewarding.

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